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Using 'moral equivalence'

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Tom Wicker has a bit of a problem. The distinguished columnist of *The New York Times* was recently stung by columnist John Chamberlain, who suggested that Mr. Wicker seems to hold some form of doctrine that the U.S.S.R. and the United States of America are "morally equivalent."

Mr. Wicker (a patriot and a good colleague in a seminar) replied in an energetic column of his own that he does not hold that the U.S.S.R. and the United States are "morally equivalent" and, further, has no respect for anyone who does. Meanwhile, Michael Kinsley wrote in his own column in *The Wall Street Journal* that he does not know of anyone who holds to the doctrine of "moral equivalence."

Now one supposes that no intelligent writer or critic in the West, faced with the naked question, "Do you or do you not hold that the U.S.S.R. and the United States are morally equivalent?", will answer "yes." True, precisely such a question was put at the Oxford Student Union. True, too, the American whose assignment it was to argue for the negative (Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger) won by a close vote. So in the real world of ideas the question is not an idle one.

But do any in America hold to it? Surely, not in its naked form. Every American writer knows at least this much: criticizing the U.S.S.R. within the U.S.S.R. as he currently criticizes the United States would land him in psychiatric detention, injected with drugs, not win him the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize. So at least one reason why the United States is not morally equivalent to the U.S.S.R. is that the latter restricts the liberty of writers.

Mr. Wicker thinks that some in the United States may be challenging the liberty of U.S. writers to criticize the actions of the United States. Mr. Wicker warns that such persons, if they look over their shoulders, will find moral equivalence gaining on them.

That warning, of course, is an idle one. No one challenges the liberty of U.S. writers to criticize any aspect of

anything whatever. What is being challenged is not intellectual liberty. What is being challenged is intellectual carelessness.

Recently, for example, Korean Airlines won a libel suit against a British writer who accused the United States of using the KAL-007 shot down by the Soviets as a spy plane. It turns out that the author of that article in Britain borrowed heavily from materials from *Tass*

and *Izvestia*, materials that are demonstrably false.

Eager enough to criticize the United States, Tom Wicker himself devoted two columns to serious consideration of an American version of that argument, which appeared in *The Nation*.

Suppose that libelous article had been true. Then the U.S. government would have been lying about KAL-007, exactly as the government of the U.S.S.R. had been lying. Moral equivalence? Careful thought is needed here.

Mr. Wicker's defense of his refusal to join a recent Washington conference sponsored jointly by the Shavano Institute of Hillsdale College and the U.S. State Department

is that he wishes to hold the U.S. government to its own high ideals, and to judge it by what it does.

That is not, of course, an example of holding the doctrine of moral equivalence. Every taxi driver in New York City daily exercises his right to criticize the U.S. government. So does every conservative, neo-conservative, moderate, liberal, and democratic socialist in the land. Criticism of government is a national sport.

Yet mere actions by governments do not get to the heart of the matter. The U.S.S.R. is properly blamed in strict moral judgment, not solely for what it does, but for its system; and not solely for its system but for the doctrine (Marxism-Leninism) by which it justifies both its existing system and every one of its actions.

It is not enough, then, to criticize the U.S.S.R. for its actions. Its system and its very ideals must be morally judged. Mr. Wicker says he is hesitant to take part in such discussions — at least at the above-mentioned Shavano conference —

because they might lead to "self-congratulation" on the part of U.S. citizens.

Self-congratulation indeed! For what else are Americans willing to give their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor, if not for those

differences of ideals, system, and action?

Furthermore, please note the frequency with which many American writers and speakers use expressions such as "the two superpowers," "the tide of history," "Afghanistan is the Soviet Vietnam," "U.S. support for terrorists in Nicaragua," and the like.

It is perfectly correct to criticize the U.S. government in its every nook and cranny. Criticism of big government is not only legitimate; it's in fashion even in the White House.

Tom Wicker is afraid of adding his weight to American anti-communism, and also afraid of adding his weight to the pride of Americans in their own country. This does not add up to the strong form of the doctrine of moral equivalence. If he looks over his shoulder, though, he'll see that, according to that method, moral equivalence is gaining on him.

For Soviet propagandists, seen more and more often on American television, not least on Ted Koppel's otherwise admirable "Night Line," adroitly cite all those American commentators who, they say, take the same positions they do. Those who tread lightly on the U.S.S.R. and heavily on the United States should also measure the uses to which their words are put in the international arena, just as they now measure them for abetting "self-congratulation."